Idaho Currents

Idaho Sees Best Water Supply Since 1999

Idaho is experiencing some of the deepest snow packs in the West this winter, according to the Idaho water officials. In fact, some places are seeing accumulations already a month or more ahead of usual – meaning if things continue, the water supply throughout the state will likely be the best since 1999.

While the news is certainly good, members of the Idaho Water Supply Committee are cautiously optimistic about what it means for the long term. Ground water levels and spring discharges are still well below normal, and the state as a whole has lost about a year's worth of accumulated moisture during the drought cycle, which has lasted six years in some parts of Idaho.

With a view of a footbridge in the distance, banks along the Boise River and a raft dock are immersed in water in this Feb. 7 photo. This is the highest flow on the river since March 1999. *(Photo by Diane Holt)*

As of Jan. 31, snowpack at Mores Creek Summit, in the Boise Mountains, was 148 percent of normal. The site usually measures about 70 inches deep this time of year, according to Ron Abramovich, a hydrologist and water supply specialist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Boise.

The Jan. 31 measurements showed 110 inches of snow at the summit and 32 inches of snow water, which is usually not found until about April, according to Abramovich.

"These severe droughts are multi-year in character," IDWR Director Karl Dreher reminded committee members. "This is certainly good news for this year, but what happens next year and in the coming years – the verdict is still out."

Dreher says it could take a series of average or above average years before the drought can be declared over.

The long range forecast for the remainder of the water accumulation season is promising – showing a better than even chance of above normal precipitation. That means flooding could potentially be a problem in some parts of Idaho.

Boise River

To help avoid possible flooding, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is releasing water in order to make room in the reservoirs for abundant runoff. The flow from Lucky Peak Reservoir was increased by about 400 cubic feet per second from a low flow of 1,300 cfs on Jan. 27 to 2,300 cfs, on Feb. 3. On Feb. 7 the river flow was increased again to 4,000 cfs (see photos).

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The last time the Boise River ran high was in March 1999 when flows went to 6,770 cfs. In May 1998, the river was at 8,350 cfs. Experts consider 6,500 cfs full channel capacity on the Boise River. When it reaches 7,000 cfs, it is considered flood stage, according to BOR officials.

Banks along the Boise River and the end of a raft dock are visible in this photo, taken on Jan. 24, prior to water being released from Lucky Peak Dam. The low flow was measured at 1,300 cubic feet per second on Jan. 27 and increased to 4,000 cfs on Feb. 7. *(Photo by Diane Holt)*

Given it has been a number of years since significant flows have occurred, there could be localized problems along the Boise River when it flows below flood stage.

More water is being released down the Boise River because upstream reservoirs are now filling. The current water storage in Boise River reservoirs is near 50 percent of capacity and the projected runoff for April through July is expected to be close to 130 percent of average.

Twin Falls

Twin Falls recorded one of its wettest Decembers in 2005, with precipitation levels nearly triple the average. A total of 3.06 inches of moisture was recorded at the Magic Valley Regional Airport, the fourth highest December total since accumulations began being recorded in 1963. A typical December average is 1.12 inches. The wettest December was in 1996 when 4.09 inches of moisture accumulated.

Dave Decker, a hydro-meteorologist technician with the National Weather Service in Boise, says the unusually wet weather was caused by low atmospheric pressure that has lingered over the Pacific Coast and the Intermountain West. The total yearly accumulation for Twin Falls was also higher than normal at 14.49 inches compared to an average annual measurement of 10.99, making it the fifth wettest year on record.

Energy Officials Plan Annual Builder Conference

National and local experts on building science and construction will speak during the Idaho Builders Energy Conference 2006 in Boise on March 2.

The conference is intended for builders, architects, appraisers, lenders, HVAC contractors and real estate professionals. Subjects will focus on home construction that reduces building failure or contractor callbacks and increases customer satisfaction.

Speakers will include Dr. Joe Lstiburek with Building Science Corporation, and employees from the Idaho Energy Division and Idaho Power Company.

Early registration is $75 prior to Feb. 24, and $100 after that date or at the door. Registration information and conference agenda are available online at www.idwr.idaho.gov/energy. The conference begins at 8 a.m. at the Washington Group Plaza Auditorium, 720 Park Blvd., in Boise.

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New Federal Energy Tax Credits Take Effect

The energy efficiency tax credits signed into law by President George W. Bush have gone into effect, making it easier for American families and businesses to reduce energy costs at home, work and on the road, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

The energy efficiency tax credits were signed into law in August 2005 as part of the first comprehensive energy legislation in over a decade. The landmark energy bill contains provisions to promote greater energy efficiency and conservation, improve the reliability of electricity delivery, and encourage increased domestic energy production, including energy from renewable sources, such as biomass and wind.

The tax credits, designed to improve America's energy efficiency, went into effect on Jan. 1. They are available for the purchase and installation of energy-efficient appliances and products, as well as the purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles such as hybrids.

"While there are easy, immediate steps that families can take to reduce their energy bills – like turning down the thermostat or weather stripping doors and windows – these tax credits will help with the purchase of bigger ticket items," said Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman.

"By reducing overall energy demand one family or business at a time we are also increasing America's energy security," he added.

The energy efficiency tax credits allow consumers to reduce their 2006 tax bills on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to the amount allowed under the law. For example, consumers who purchase the most fuel-efficient vehicles could reduce their tax liability by up to $3,400, while those who install certain products such as energy-efficient windows, insulation, doors, roofs and heating/cooling equipment in the home can receive up to $500 off of their federal tax bills.

Specific tax benefits for a taxpayer's principle home include:

- $50 for purchasing an advanced main air-circulating fan;
- $150 for installing a highly efficient furnace or boiler;
- $200 for installing energy-efficient windows;
- $300 for purchasing a highly efficient central air conditioner, heat pump or water heater;
- 30 percent, or up to $2,000, for the purchase of solar water-heating equipment (this does not apply to equipment used to heat swimming pools or hot tubs).
- 30 percent, or up to $2,000, for the purchase of solar electric equipment.

Businesses may be eligible for credits or deductions such as:

- 30 percent tax credit for the installation of qualifying solar equipment on buildings;
- Business tax credits for companies that build highly energy-efficient homes;
- Credits for companies that manufacture energy-efficient appliances such as dishwashers, clothes washers and refrigerators.
- Tax deductions for heating, cooling, water heating and interior lighting improvements in commercial building.

If you bought or leased a new clean-fuel or hybrid vehicle by the end of 2005, or plan to do so in 2006 or 2007, it may be eligible for a one-time "Clean-Fuel" vehicle tax deduction of up to $3,400, depending on how fuel-efficient the vehicle is rated, according to the IRS. The amount of the tax credit depends on when the vehicle was purchased; so consumers seeking the best credit may want to buy early is 2006. Businesses are eligible for tax credits up to $12,000 for heavy-duty hybrid vehicles.

Tax Credits For Hybrid Vehicles

Vehicle Make & Model	Model Years
Ford Escape Hybrid	2005-2006
Honda Accord Hybrid	2005
Honda Civic Hybrid	2003-2005
Honda Insight	2000-2005
Lexus RX 400h	2006
Mercury Mariner Hybrid	2006
Toyota Highlander Hybrid	2006
Toyota Prius	2001-2005

Vehicles in the table may be eligible for a "clean fuel" deduction of $2,000 if placed in service by the end of 2005.

Source: U.S. Department of Energy

If you still have questions about the credits, you are encouraged to do a little research. Details of what measures and equipment will qualify for credits should soon be (if not already) in IRS publications. Questions can also be directed to the IRS or your tax preparer.

DOE Sets New Standards For Air Conditioners

Even though it's still cold outside, the U.S. Department of Energy is thinking about summer. As of Jan. 23, new air conditioners have to meet higher energy efficiency standards.

Air conditioners manufactured after Jan. 23 must achieve a Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio (SEER) of 13 or higher – 30 percent more efficient than the previous SEER standard of 10 – and 13 SEER/7.7 HSPF for new central air conditioning heat pumps.

SEER is DOE's measure of energy efficiency for the seasonal cooling performance of central air conditioners and central air conditioning heat pumps. HSPF stands for Heating Seasonal Performance Factor, the DOE measure of energy efficiency for the seasonal heating performance of central air conditioning heat pumps.

This does not mean you have to buy a new air conditioner, nor will it mean that replacement parts and services will no longer be available for existing home systems, according to DOE. It means that any air conditioner manufactured after that date will meet or exceed the 13 SEER.

What are homeowners required to do now that the new rules are in effect? Nothing right now. Central air conditioners manufactured before Jan. 13 and already in stores can still be sold at 10 SEER. However, when you get ready to buy a new efficient model, shop around and if necessary, ask for the 13 SEER.

Is purchasing a 13 SEER-rated air conditioner worth the energy savings? A SEER rating of 13 is 30 percent more efficient than a 10 SEER rating. The Energy Division estimates the 13 SEER model would save $65 in an average summer in Boise, based on current power rates.

DOE estimates that the "lifespan" of a central air conditioner is about 15-20 years. So if a homeowner is considering purchasing a new air conditioner in 2006, it's recommended that they consider the model with the higher SEER number. Tax credits may also be available for the higher SEER models (13 and higher).

Why the higher standards? DOE was directed by the Energy Policy and Conservation Act to consider establishing minimum efficiency standards for various consumer products, including central air conditioners and central air conditioning heat pumps. The amended standards take into account a decade of technological advancements and will save consumers and the nation money and significant amounts of energy.

UI Names New College of Engineering Dean

The University of Idaho has selected Aicha Elshabini as the next dean of the College of Engineering. Elshabini comes to UI from the University of Arkansas, where she is distinguished professor and head of the Department of Electrical Engineering.

"One of the core needs for promoting economic development in Idaho is in science and technology, applied to the emerging needs of society," said Tim White, president of the University of Idaho. "We are delighted that Dr. Elshabini will provide strong and aspirational leadership in engineering to help direct this vital effort."

As dean, Elshabini will provide leadership to a college with seven departments, six research centers and institutes, nearly 1,800 undergraduate and graduate students, and 101 faculty and staff members. The College of Engineering has strong programs across the state including, Boise, Idaho Falls, Post Falls and Moscow.

White and Baker expressed their appreciation to Dr. Chuck Peterson, who, for the past year, served the college and the university as interim dean. Elshabini begins her duties at UI in July 2006.